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ABSTRACT

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part, "Speaking Pictures and Visual Poems," briefly considers the origin of the term "sister arts." Discussed are the three main features of the historical relationship between painting and literature in the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain and draws out their educational implications. Part 2, "Teaching the Sister Arts," deals more explicitly with teaching. Examples of recent "pairs" of paintings and poems are discussed in which can be observed both the poets' responses to their chosen paintings and some students' responses to a painting and a poem it inspired. The paper concludes with a brief comment on the pedagogical benefits that can accrue from working with such materials and methods which, by their name, define the role of the collaborative reader of two interrelated art forms. (EH)

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS, 35

EDUCATION AND THE SISTER ARTS

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DECEMBER 1994

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EDUCATION AND THE SISTER ARTS

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- The Tate Gallery, London, for The Boyhood of Raleigh John Everett Millais and Roger McGough for his poem "The Boyhood of Raleigh".

EDUCATION AND THE SISTER ARTS

I. SPEAKING PICTURES AND VISUAL POEMS

Introduction

When Laurence Sterne invites his readers to paint their own portrait of Widow Wadman "as like your mistress as you can - as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you" in the two blank pages he leaves for them in Tristram Shandy[1] he does two things: first, he gives a typically eccentric twist to the neo-classic tendency to relate literature to the other arts, a link particularly apparent in the inclination in the eighteenth century to see painting and poetry as "sister arts"; and, secondly, through providing this yawning Iserian "indeterminacy gap"[2], he testifies to the need for collaborative readers. Sterne's quirky humour indicates my present concerns. The first part of this paper briefly considers the origin of the term "sister arts"; it discusses three main features of the historical relationship between painting and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain and draws out their educational implications. Part Two deals more explicitly with teaching. Examples of recent "pairs" of paintings and poems are discussed in which can be observed both the poets' responses to their chosen paintings and some students' responses to a painting and a poem it inspired. The paper concludes with a brief comment on the pedagogical benefits that can accrue from working with such materials and methods which, by their nature, define the role of the collaborative reader in respect of two interrelated art forms.

By the eighteenth century, Horace's celebrated phrase ut pictura poesis ("as a painting, so a poem"),[3] had assumed the status of a critical axiom. The standard history of how the relationship between the two arts developed from classical antiquity to the neo-classic period of English literature is that of Hagstrum[4] whose main concern is with the tradition and conventions of literary pictorialism, particularly as they are manifest in poetry from Dryden to Gray. Clearly, such a focus both provides an essential basis in literary history and begs the question of what relationship has existed between these arts subsequently. What follows can do no more than hint at these matters; yet my argument is grounded in a pedagogical conviction similar to that given by Hagstrum when explaining the impetus for his study:

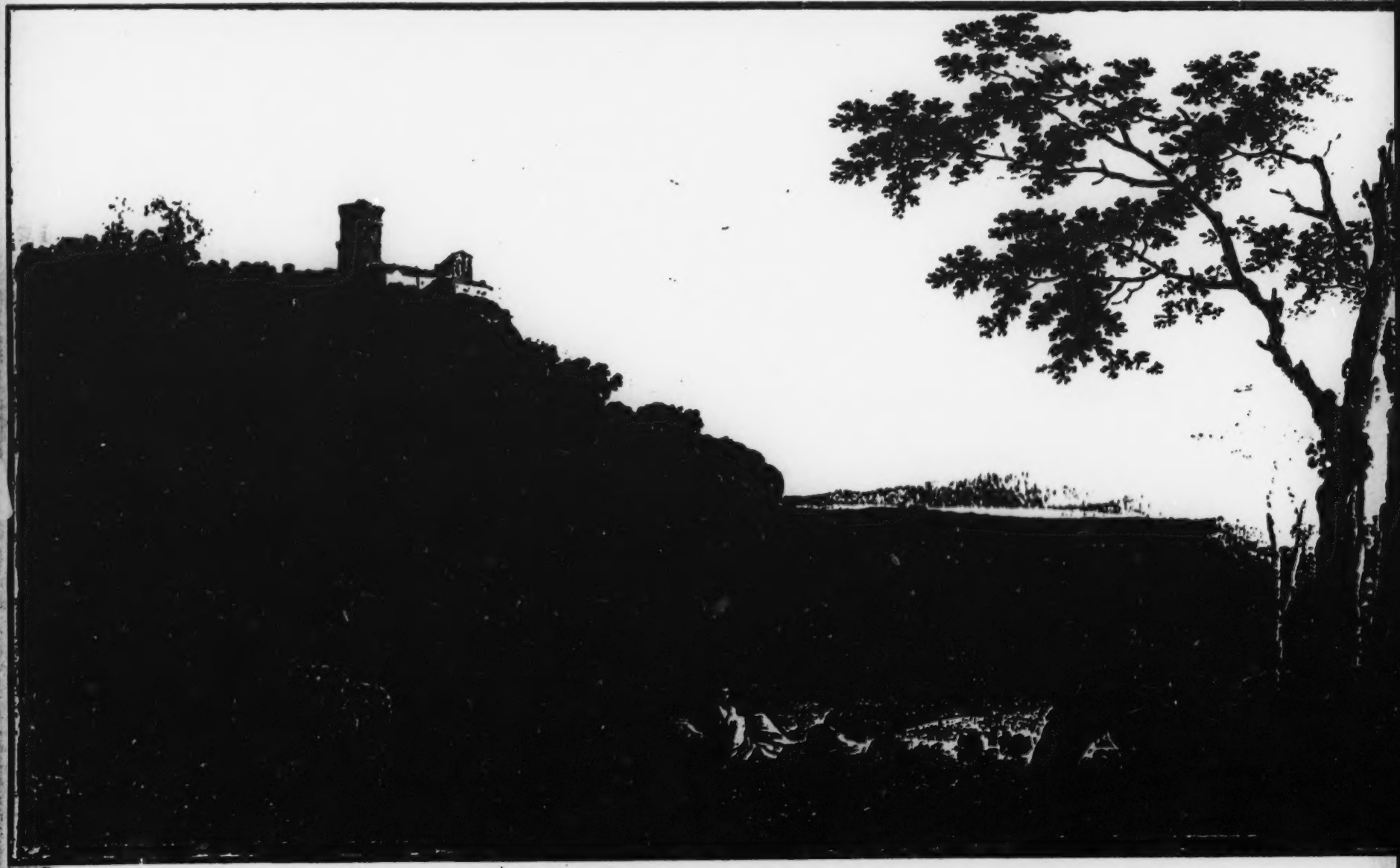
> " ... I became convinced that valid generalization did emerge from a concentration on one genre of poetry, the genre represented by Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn. That kind of verse - and closely related prose - in which a real or imagined work of visual art is the ostensible subject ..."[5].

What I hope to show is that certain generalisable conclusions can be drawn from a complementary concentration upon the educational implications of this genre. Historically, three themes suggest themselves as being of particular significance in the context of education and the sister arts: changing attitudes to the natural world, the concept of childhood, and the role of narrative. Consideration of these in turn allows reference, albeit briefly, to artists who worked in both media, as well as to those who, while operating in one medium, conceived of their work partly in terms of the other. For it will become evident that the entwined history of the two arts encouraged the idea of a poem as a speaking picture and a picture as a visual poem.

Ut Pictura Poesis: Landscapes

More is implied by ut pictura poesis than a simple reciprocity. The twin notions of poetry as "word-painting" and of painting aspiring to be "poetic" were largely popular descriptions derived from an on-going debate about contemporary understanding of what constitutes a work of art. Dryden[6] and Pope[7] both write explicitly of the sister arts, the latter in his Epistle to Mr Jervas, describing them as "congenial" and "kindred" arts which "each from each contract new strength and light" and where "images reflect from art to art". And, as Hagstrum[8] and Abrams[9] argue, although ut pictura poesis disappears from mainstream romantic criticism, its influence persists in the "picturesque" movement in late eighteenth-century taste and in the predilection for pictorialism in poetry which continues well into the Victorian period.

This intimacy of word and image is nowhere more apparent than in the changing attitudes to nature during these centuries. The literary pictorialism in Pope's Windsor Forest (1713) or Thomson's The Seasons (1726-30) is complemented by the Italianate landscape paintings of Richard Wilson in, for example, his Valley of the Dee (c.1762) in which the few small



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Richard Wilson: Classical Landscape (1761)

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human figures and the tiny, scattered cattle pass almost unnoticed before the vast, soft-coloured sky and the mighty landscape rolling away into the hazy distance. Wilson was much influenced by Claude Lorraine as his Classical Landscape (1761) shows, perhaps, as Kenneth Clark[10] has suggested, because he felt an affinity with that sense of a lost Golden Age in Claude's pictures and the sense they convey that "nature could be laid out for man's delight, like a gentleman's park.

"Such images appealed to eighteenth century taste: scenery gained cult status. "England's green and pleasant land" in Blake's phrase was increasingly viewed both as a source of interest in itself and as a picture to be translated on to canvas. Nature becomes subject, not as a post-Renaissance standard to be adhered to, but for the land, the water, the sky, and the light of which it is composed. In Wilson, as in Claude, the centre of a landscape is an area of light; often there is a sense of "back-lighting" (what Constable later called Claude's "brightness"[11]) suffusing the whole image and investing everything with the same serene mood. Light, with all its religious connotations, mediated through Milton[12] and Newton[13], also suffuses eighteenth century poetry. Indeed, the poets helped the painters to see; the locus classicus was Thomson's The Seasons. Landscape after landscape was painted and exhibited with reference to passages from this work, analogues of Thomson's descriptive and emotional passages, created with the same "astonished eye" through which poet and painters sought to connect the landscape of natural phenomena with the landscape of mind.

> "Hence larger prospects of the beauteous whole
> Would gradual open on our opening minds;
> And each diffusive harmony unite
> In full perfection to the astonished eye"[14].

Nature in Thomson's poems is near religion, little short of the pantheism that invests the landscapes in painting and poetry of the full-blown Romantic period form 1790-1830. His poem, A Hymn[15] apostrophizes a Deity made manifest in Nature and conceptualises the changing seasons as "but the varied God" - a philosophical position later explored in the work of both Constable and Wordsworth.

In Leslie's[16] account of Constable's last lecture on landscape painting, he recalls that Constable "quoted from Thomson's The Seasons the sixteen introductory lines to 'Winter'

as a beautiful instance of the poet identifying his own feelings with external nature" ; and elsewhere in Leslie's celebrated Memoirs[17] it is evident that Constable felt a strong affinity with Wordsworth's concept of nature. Both, as young artists, had an "innocent eye"; both felt the rapture of the created world around them; and both elevated this feeling with a moral and spiritual quality of its own. Memories of childhood experiences are the source of the emotive power in both poet and painter. Writing of his boyhood in the Stour valley, Constable remarks in one of his most famous letters:

> "The sound of water escaping from mill-dams, ... willows, old rotten banks, slimy posts, and brickwork. I love such things ... I shall never cease to paint such places. They have always been my delight ... I associate my 'careless boyhood' to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter ..."[18]

Similarly, these Lake District scenes made Wordsworth a poet:

> "I cannot paint
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite: a feeling and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye."[19]

It is precisely this sensuous response to nature, with its willingness to repudiate "any interest unborrowed from the eye", that is the fresh perception of the romantic period. More particularly, Nature as perceived through the eye of childhood, is regarded as the source of the best education.

Childhood: Image and Idea

As with pictures of landscape, so with pictures of childhood. The autobiographical recollections of Wordsworth and Constable are symptomatic of a more general shift:

"Childhood", as Peter Coveney puts it, "as a major theme came with the generation of Blake and Wordsworth."[20] Coveney acknowledges the presence of pre-romantic children in literature - in Elizabethan lyrics and in the eighteenth century complimentary verses addressed to young "children of quality" - and implies a parallel in the painted children of the same periods:

> "The whole approach to childhood before Rousseau is nowhere better seen than in the fashionable dressing up of children as little adults. Art provides no more pathetic sight than the portraiture of this and the previous century with its little Dutch and English children starched into lace and taffeta before their time."[21]

With the appearance of Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience and Wordsworth's poems in The Lyrical Ballads, both within the last decade of the eighteenth century, we are presented with something new: the child as symbol. Blake's "innocence" and Wordsworth's "natural piety" turn conventional Christian imagery around: original sin is confronted by original innocence.

Blake took an uncompromisingly oppositional stance towards eighteenth-century rationalism and its manifestation in the institutions of his time. The innocent child was the central symbol of this opposition. As the introductory poem to the "Songs of Innocence"[22] makes clear, both the inspiration of and the audience for this sequence are defined in terms of the child. The often remarked "deceptive simplicity" of the poems stems as much from the way words are laid on the page like the clear, pure notes of musical score, as it does from the symbolism of their content. Read aloud (as "songs", especially, must be), innocence invests the clean structural lines of the poems with a beguiling aural geometry, heard with particular clarity in, say, The Echoing Green or Spring. The poems come alive with all the robustness of children: each has its own autonomous identity. This morphological strength of the poems is complemented by their metaphorical power. The poem/painting Infant Joy[23] shows as clearly as any how the two arts deepen each other.

William Blake: Infant Joy (1789)

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A delicate text, largely monosyllabic (only three words with even two syllables), with the repeated vocabulary of a celebratory song, the whole comprising a series of transparent statements about the joy of naming a new life. Blake situates this seemingly innocent verbal structure within a strongly delineated, vividly coloured painting in order to explore this concept of "new life": the new poem is thus enclosed within the body of the painting like the child in the womb. Poem and painting express the concept of "new life" both structurally and symbolically. For Blake includes two crimson flowers on the plant: one, an unopened bud symbolising the virgin's womb; the other and dominant image is the open flower, the impregnated womb, in which the new born child lies in its mother's lap. Facing them stands a winged messenger with hands outstretched making the scene an "annunciation". The poem/painting of Infant Joy encapsulates the central theme of the Songs: an affirmation that Innocence is the state of oneness between the Creator and all created things; and the necessity of art lies in the impulse to express this truth.

Where Blake opposes the joy of Innocence with the negative, corrupting power of human nature and society in the Songs of Experience, Wordsworth concentrates the whole dialectic into a single poem which stands as the icon for the nineteenth-century idea of childhood - his Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood[24]. The early stanzas lament the loss of the visionary power of childhood; the later ones argue a theory of human growth to explain the loss. But the vision of innocence is more convincingly portrayed than are the consolations of maturity with which time replaces it. A disingenuous advocacy of "the philosophic mind" cannot disguise the regret and pessimism which accompany the loss of innocence:

> "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the Growing Boy."

Nonetheless, for Wordsworth childhood is the key to the full organic development of the human mind. Here, as in Tintern Abbey and The Prelude, he reflects upon his own experiences as a means of exploring the concept of childhood and, by extension, of establishing general principles of human nature. The child is central to the "wisdom" he sought to express: the famous epigraph to the Ode makes this clear:

"The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety".

In Wordsworth as in Blake, the concept of Childhood - thought treated differently - is not only intimately bound up with their perceptions of the natural world but is also of central symbolic significance in the development of their thought. The shift of consciousness located in their work was neither as sudden as this brief account might suggest, nor solely the result of two, albeit influential, geniuses arriving at the same time. Both owed much to earlier literary traditions, as Heather Glen[25] has shown: Blake to children's literature and Wesley's hymns; Wordsworth to magazine verse. Moreover, as the nineteenth century wore on, the symbol of the innocent child suffered a steady deterioration. The strong, clear imagery of Blake was eventually replaced by the sentimental child-figures of Victorian genre painting and popular verse. Yet the child as theme and subject proved durable: the interesting distinction in literature and painting lies between those who found in childhood a potent image of growth and understanding, and those who retreated to it as a form of regressive nostalgia. Whereas Blake and Wordsworth diagnose and explore the educational significance of childhood, Thomas Webster's popular paintings The Smile and The Frown (1841) (both accompanied by quotations from Goldsmith's Deserted Village), and J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan merely exploit its sentimental appeal.

The Narrative Subject

In the history of western art, narrative subjects appear in many guises: mythological incidents, nativities, crucifixions and other Biblical stories are but the most obvious. Narrative is at once both an inclusive, ill-defined term and yet of particular significance with reference to the sister arts in the period under consideration. Aspects of narrative appear in eighteenth century conversation pieces, and in the morality series of Hogarth; in Victorian anecdotal paintings by Mulready and others; in the "costume-history" paintings of religious and literary subjects so favoured by the Pre-Raphaelites; and in the works of the nineteenth century social realist painters. "Narrative painting" thus overlaps with both "genre painting" and "history painting": a more delimited definition might insist that the term implies a literary element, more particularly, the selection of a moment in an implied story such that

the viewer knows, or can guess, what has happened and what is about to happen. W.F. Yeames's well-known picture "And When Did You Last See Your Father?" (1878), with the young aristocratic boy being questioned by the Roundheads, exemplifies many of these characteristics without being tied to a particular literary text.

In the present context two related aspects of narrative have particular significance: the role of literary sources in the painters' choice of subject; and the "literariness" that occurs in both concept and composition, particularly in the nineteenth century.

For the best part of two centuries, from Hogarth's The Beggar's Opera (1728) to Waterhouse's The Lady of Shalott (1888), English painting is liberally punctuated with famous images based on literary texts. Shakespeare, Keats and Tennyson are perhaps the most popular poets with painters. From a pedagogical standpoint, the narrative subject holds particular interest when the same text is depicted by different artists. For example, comparative studies of the following illuminate both the paintings themselves and the poetry from which they spring.

° Scenes from Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream

- Henry Fuseli: Titania and Bottom (1780-90)
- Richard Dadd: Oberon and Titania (1854-58)
- Sir.J. Noel Paton: The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania (1847)

° Paintings of Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet by John Everett Millais (1852), Arthur Hughes (1852) and John William Waterhouse (n.d.).

° Paintings of John Keats's, La Belle Dame Sans Merci by John William Waterhouse (1893), Sir Frank Dicksee (1902) and Frank Cadogan Cowper (1926).

° Paintings of Tennyson's The Lady of Shalott by William Holman Hunt (1886-1905), John William Waterhouse (1888) and Sidney Harold Meteyard (1913).

As Timothy Hilton[26] comments when writing about the poet/painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the theory of ut pictura poesis loses some of its neo-classical character and develops a peculiarly English flavour in the nineteenth century. Commenting explicitly on the sister arts he says:

"The ramifications of this tradition have been widely felt in English culture, but with a bias, as is natural in a verbally sophisticated but visually under-educated nation, towards the illustration of a literary text - the painter's art thus becoming a mere adjunct to something which is self-explanatory in the first place".

While Hilton's original diagnosis of bias may be correct, it is probable that Millais's Ophelia and Waterhouse's The Lady of Shalott now occupy a place in the nation's cultural consciousness that belies the status of mere "adjuncts". (One suspects that rather more people have seen the paintings than have read the texts). What is undeniable about the examples given above is that they all show painters responding to works by major poets in the literary canon and, to this extent, the painters may be thought to have adopted a deferential stance towards these works. Yet, to call such paintings textual "illustration" is at best inadequate and at worst pejorative for, in the broadest sense, all art is illustrative and a powerful factor in the process of learning about the world. Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi argues the point:

"God's works - paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don't object, 'His works
'Are here already; nature is complete:
'Suppose you reproduce her - (which you can't)
'There's no advantage! you must beat her, then.'
For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted - better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out".[27]

Narrative subjects from Shakespeare, Keats and Tennyson draw the viewer/reader into a doubly-rich imaginative dialogue where both painters and poets are "lending their minds out".

A further dimension of the narrative subject is revealed by painters' responses to the popular poetry of the Victorian period. The significant relationship here is not with the literature per se, but with the painters' reactions to contemporary society as portrayed in the literature. The issue is most clearly seen in the so-called "social realist" painters such as Fildes, Holl, Herkomer and Redgrave. As Treuherz[28] argues powerfully, the very phrase is suspect. His lengthy description is included since it not only questions the notion of social realism and vividly evokes the paintings of these lesser-known artists, but also because it hints that the corresponding literary descriptions were rather more true to life.

> "Artists might try to tackle social issues, but their achievement in terms of realism varied. Almost unconsciously, artists evaded harshness and brutality. The subjects they did not paint were as significant as those they did. Emigration was shown by departures or the reading of letters, without picturing the slum conditions which caused the exodus; disease was typically portrayed as a pale convalescent, often a pretty child; death was painted in terms of funerals and mourners, with rarely a corpse in sight; workers were shown resting or as individual heroic or tragic figures, rather than as serried ranks of dehumanised factory operatives; field-workers outnumbered industrial workers; prisons were shown but not violent crime or rioting. For all the convincing surface detail of pictures of crowded city streets, the destitution and dirt familiar from written descriptions were usually absent. Hovels were spacious and well provided with furnishings; starving waifs with expressions of sweet pathos on their well-scrubbed faces showed no physical evidence of the malnutrition or the deformed limbs which are known to have been common among the poor. Often pictures supposed to show the lower classes were only too obviously painted from professional models posed in the studio wearing artfully torn rags".

These sanitised narrative paintings owed less to the urgency of the real social problems of the time and more to commercial demands and literary sources - in particular, to the commissioning of artists to provide pictures for the expanding business of illustrated journalism, and to the stimulus of contemporary fiction and poetry which dealt with social issues. One example, especially, stands out.

In 1843 the Christmas issue of Punch printed Thomas Hood's poem, The Song of the Shirt.[29] It begins:

With fingers weary and worn,
  With eyelids heavy and red,
A Woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
  Plying her needle and thread -
    Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the 'Song of the Shirt!'

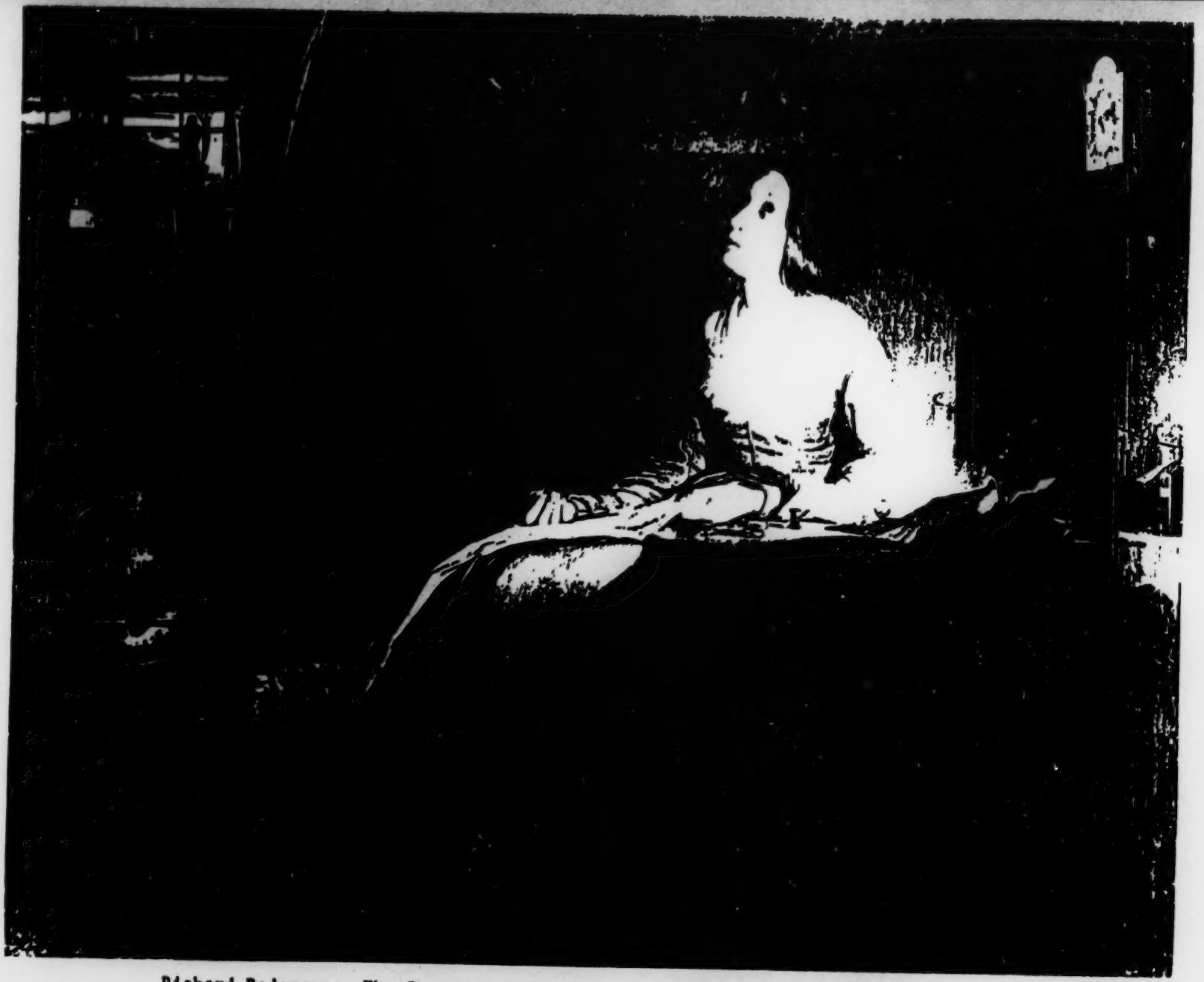
This insistent, work-song rhythm carries the poem forward through twelve stanzas in which the spectre of death is complemented by memories of rural freedom, and mechanistic slavery to Mammon supplants the noble ideal of "Christian work". The last verse repeats this first one with the pointed addition of an extra, penultimate line:

"Would that its tone could reach the Rich!"

The poem had immediate widespread success since it dramatised the notorious abuse of sweated labour in the "rag trade"; it became one of the best-known poems of the Victorian period and remained popular well into the present century (I recall hearing it at my mother's knee).

A few months after the appearance of Hood's poem, Richard Redgrave's painting The Sempstress (1844) was exhibited at the Royal Academy with a catalogue entry that included these lines from verse 4 clearly indicating the close relationship of painting and poem:

"O! Men with Sisters dear!
  O! Men! with Mother and Wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
  But human creatures' lives!"



Richard Redgrave: The Sempstress (1844)

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There is no evidence, as Treuherz points out, that Redgrave visited garrets or workrooms. Most sempstresses were employed in sordid, overcrowded unhealthy workshops rather than as home-workers. Clearly, Redgrave's image is more a romanticised version of Hood's lone Woman than a figure drawn from life; and her supplicant bearing, with eyes raised to heaven, associates her as much with Renaissance portrayals of saints as it does with the realities of Victorian London.

If such paintings inevitably reflect the conventions of their artistic ancestry, they also possess characteristics more readily associated with verbal art and which are not necessarily explicitly linked to particular texts. Literariness has a pervasive influence in the paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the representation of human figures, the delight in documentary detail, the presentation of incident and the psychological relationships of depicted characters. Some stories in paint are sequentially told such as Hogarth's A Rake's Progress (1735) or Marriage à la Mode (1745); most are suggested by a single compelling image as in, say, Wallis's The Death of Chatterton (1856). I have written in detail elsewhere[30] about these and other narrative paintings in order to demonstrate their literary characteristics. Suffice it to say here that they exemplify, both in their conception and in the way they define their implied viewers, a narrative art that signals that it is to be read as well as viewed. Reading paintings may occur in the sense we have of decoding the logic of the depicted incident from left to right across the canvas, as occurs in Yeames's picture mentioned above, or in a Hogarthian series. It may be evident in our awareness that the impact of a painting is that of dramatic action, of the telling moment: that the smoking candle implies that Chatterton's suicide has occurred just moments earlier and we are invited to reconstruct his final movements from the 'props' Wallis gives us - the coat cast on the chair, the torn papers, and the arsenic bottle on the floor. Most frequently of all, the viewer is cast in a reader's role through the sense that his or her angle of gaze is predetermined in the composition. Narrative paintings, perhaps more than others, contain the instructions of how they are to be read. And because they are narratives, they often define the stance of the beholder as "four-square" to the subject where the scene as presented to the eye assumes the qualities of a stage set. Time and again in narrative paintings the relationship between painter and public is a theatrical one: the implied artist/dramatist and the implied viewer/reader take on complementary roles. The artist is a composite of writer and director,

stage designer and "props" person; and the viewer is defined as a play-goer watching an eye-level scene from the stalls. Literariness is endemic in such painting.

Educational Implications

In addition to the motivation afforded by the inherent interest of these two related art forms (an issue further explored in Part Two of this paper), the main educational benefits lie in the enhanced historical and cultural awareness offered by studying the sister arts. Students are often bemused by terms such as "neo-classical", "Augustan", "Romanticism", "Victorian", those serviceable labels that literary and art history employ to describe aspects of artistic expression that share common features. These constructs of convenience are derived as much from pictorial images as from literary texts: Hogarth's London provides *the* imagery of the capital in the mid-eighteenth century rather more than Pope's Twickenham or Gay's Trivia; Constable's landscapes are the imagery of nineteenth-century English countryside as powerfully as Wordsworth's Lake District or Wye Valley; Pre-Raphaelite and and other mid-century paintings of the interiors of middle class homes play a major role, as vividly as that of Dickens' novels, in creating our concept of "Victorianism", its culture and its values. For all students, and particularly for those studying English as a foreign language or whose knowledge of England is slight, paintings provide a historical "virtual reality" in which the contemporary literature can be located.

Two glosses upon this notion are necessary. The first is to realise the potential inaccuracy of such constructs if they are construed too literally. For example, the traditional account of literary history describes the period from Dryden to Johnson in terms of "classicism" or "Augustanism". The conventional view is that the "classic" style imitates reality, follows the underlying principles of Nature, and is characterised by a calm, static formality which expresses both contemporary theories about the world and is reflected in an ordered, hierarchical political system. As Marilyn Butler[31] points out this construct is itself a creation of the late nineteenth century and "probably reflects a prejudiced, outdated and inaccurate stereotype of the late eighteenth century, as an era of stasis rather than of rapid expansion and change". She goes on:

> "Use of terms like "Augustanism" and "classicism" tends indeed to obscure the fact that in literature as in the visual arts a reaction and even a revolution against some of the social implications of early eighteenth century art was already occurring by about 1750".

It is a valuable aspect of students' learning to deconstruct these conventional labels and expose them as, at best, approximations.

The second caveat is to recognise that the relationship is not a simple mirroring of one art by the other. The visual landscape of Pope's poetry, for example, is not a reflection of contemporaneous English art but of Italianate paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Claude Lorraine and Salvator Rosa, and of classical statuary. Conversely, Victorian narrative paintings, for all their literariness, do not limit their references to contemporary poetic subjects such as The Lady of Shalott but, as we have seen, rather seek visual interpretations of older literature, not least of Shakespeare's plays. Herein lies the prime educational advantage: study of the two arts together offers students access both synchronically to the artistic connections within a given period, and diachronically to the artistic canon of valued and influential works from earlier centuries which were revered at that time.

II. TEACHING THE SISTER ARTS

Poems are 'readings' as well as writings; and, when a writer's object of attention is a painting, interest lies in the angle that the poem takes on its referent and the legibility of its 'reading'. During the last decade there has been a vogue for writing about paintings, offering ample opportunity to observe the stances poets adopt towards their particular choices and the nature of their interpolations. This recent trend was initiated by two anthologies, With a Poet's Eye (1986)[32] and Voices in the Gallery (1986)[33], both published by The Tate Gallery, which juxtapose paintings with poems written about them or, as with some of those in the latter book, closely connected with them. Writing about these publications in Poetry Review[34], Rosemary Hill commented:

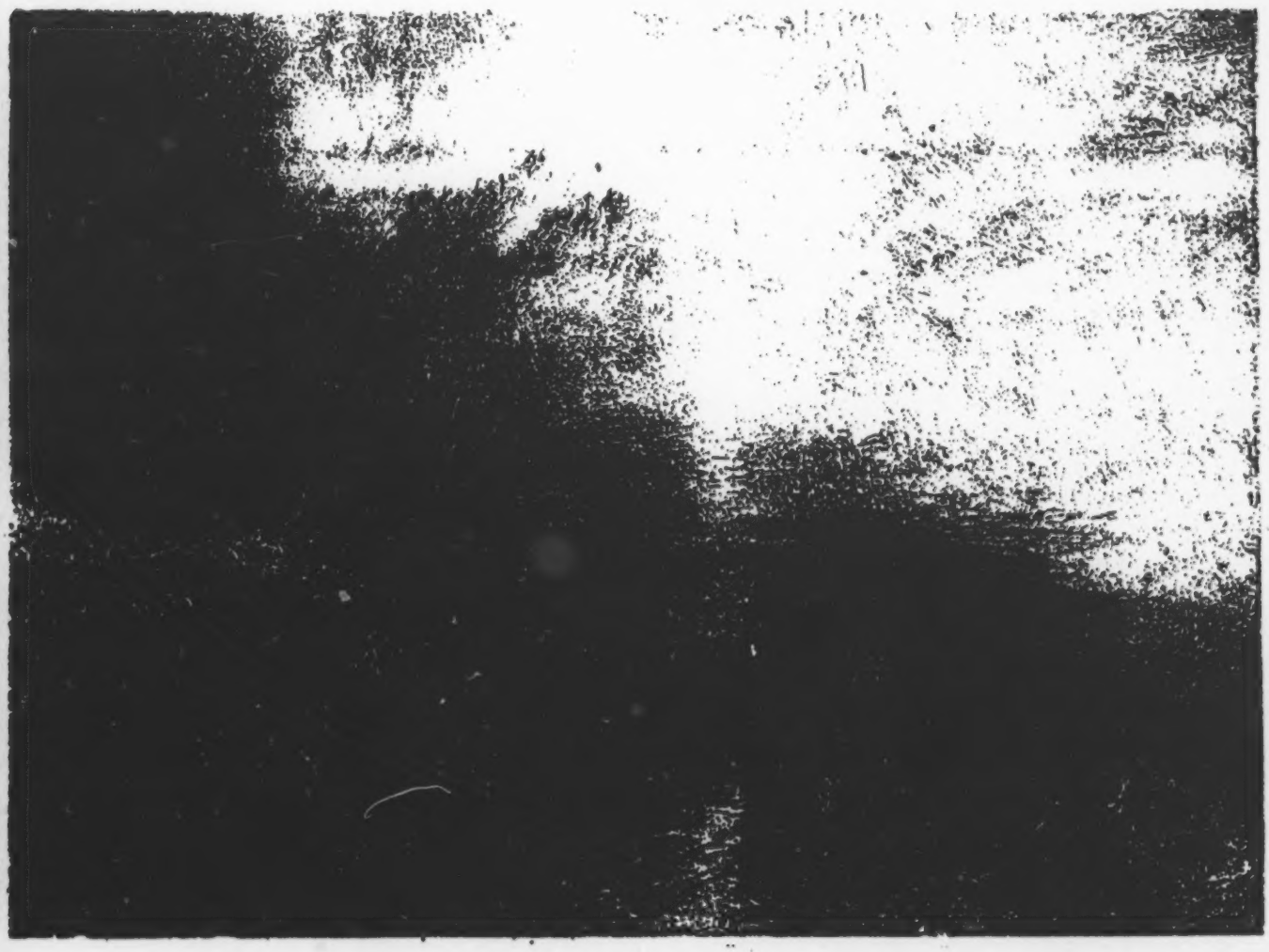
> "The result is rather like a round of pro-celebrity golf. The painters - the pros - loll about in full-colour reproduction while the poets, anxious to prove their sensitivity to another art form, bite their lips in concentration as they tee up to take a shot. As in TV so in poetry. Some are so good that they link themselves permanently to the picture - you will never see it in quite the same way again. Others cover themselves with divots and embarrassment and should have stayed at home.

Two individual authors who have turned in sound performances are R S Thomas (1985)[35] and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1990)[36]. Later aspirants who should have remained in the clubhouse include Paul Durcan[37] whose two not-so-slim volumes of verse in this area are full of sad mis-hits. His efforts, like some in the Tate's collections, are salutary. What one looks for in such juxtaposition and what justifies their publication, is what the Abses call their "illuminating synergy"; the two commonest pitfalls negating this effect are when the poet's stance is either too close or too distant. Some poets demean their subjects by writing with the myopic scrutiny of an insurance claimant; others all but ignore the paintings per se and write about topics so loosely related to them that the visual stimulus seems scarcely necessary. Two anthologies for classroom use which seek to avoid these tendencies are Double Vision (1990)[38] and Painting with Words (1995)[39] which include pairs of paintings and poems where the two arts illuminate each other. Whatever our judgements on the ways particular poems read particular paintings, the mode these readings take is inevitably narrative: narrative that is, in the sense that Barbara Hardy[40] means when she describes it as "a primary act of mind", and Robert Scholes[41] when he says that "narrative is a major armature of human thought". Viewers, whether poets or not, use narrative as a means of making sense of what they see. Moreover, with the representational paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the relationship is dialogic: the narrative embedded in the depicted subject of the picture is complemented by the storying mode that viewers adopt to make meaning. When the viewer is a writer, the effort is always to situate the timeless present of the painting into the temporal sequence of the poem. Poets adopt a variety of stances in pursuit of this goal, from the "fictive time" of the people in a painting (for example, Gareth Owen's poem on Henry Wallis's painting The Siesta[42]) to the simulated "real time" of the viewer interpreting the artist's work (for example, Michael Longley's poem on L.S.Lowry's Man Lying on a Wall[43]). Elsewhere[44], I have shown how a

narratological analysis of the first example and a visual mapping of responses to the second can illuminate both poem and painting. A more recent poem offers a different perspective: a new narrative that deconstructs an old painting by problematising the cultural conditions and artistic impulses that produced it; a late masterpiece by England's greatest painter re-viewed through the lens of black history.

A Poem Reads a Painting

David Dabydeen's long poem Turner (1994)[45] is based on J.M.W. Turner's painting "Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and the Dying - Typhoon Coming on" (1840).



J.M.W. Turner: Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and the Dying - Typhoon coming on. (1840)

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The immediate literary influences upon Turner's work have been well-documented by Lindsay[46] and Gage[47]. They range from Thomson's Summer to a new edition of T. Clarkson's History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1839) which recounted the story of the slave-ship Song in 1783, in which slaves dying of an epidemic were thrown overboard so that insurance, available for "losses at sea" but not for disease, could be claimed.

Turner's lengthy title for the painting implies a narrative imagination at work; and the lines from his own Fallacies of Hope which accompanied the picture on exhibition, extend this reading and indicate his sympathies.

> "Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
> You angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
> Declare the Typhon's coming.
> Before it sweep your decks, throw overboard
> The dead and dying - n'er heed their chains.
> Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
> Where is thy market now?"[48]

The painting shows a stormy, red sunset with the slave-ship seemingly half-submerged between the violence of the sea and the sky, while a paler shaft of light directs our attention to the manacled limbs and the sharks in the foreground. As Lindsay says: "Here is one of his works in which deep red means blood". Turner's fragment of poetry throws us into the midst of dramatic action, like the opening scene of The Tempest, and directs our attention into the future where the inhumanity of the market-system will be written in the insurance company's ledger.

By 1844 the painting belonged to John Ruskin who, in his Modern Painters (1843), had written a eulogy to Turner's colours and composition:

> ".... beyond dispute, the noblest sea that Turner has painted, and, if so, the noblest certainly ever painted by man, is that of the Slave Ship .... Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold

and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea. I believe, if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this".[49]

Ruskin's response to the virtuosity of the painting is clearly complemented by an awareness of the evil it portrays; yet Dabydeen comments on Ruskin's account: "Its (i.e. Slavers) subject, the shackling and drowning of Africans, was relegated to a brief footnote in Ruskin's essay. The footnote reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard."[50]

This judgement is hard to sustain in the light of the quotation from Ruskin above. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the fact that Dabydeen's poem is as much a rejoinder to the whole colonial legacy as it is to Turner and Ruskin, as his Preface indicates. The poem moves with the heavy swell of big seas, with rolling rhythms and leisurely pace, through its twenty-five sections. Its stance is oppositional: the two images around which the story of the poem revolves - the submerged head of the African that Dabydeen detects in the foreground of Turner's painting, and a stillborn child tossed overboard from a future ship - are transfixed for ever in the history of cruelty immortalised in the painting. Dabydeen comments:

"Neither can escape Turner's representation of them as exotic and sublime victims. Neither can describe themselves anew but are indelibly stained by Turner's language and imagery".

The shackles of African slaves were of iron. Dabydeen's struggle is to come to terms with the shackles of history. The pain and resentment are channelled into a mythic narrative and displaced on to two fictional Turner characters. Dabydeen's Preface concludes:

The intensity of Turner's painting is such that I believe the artist in private must have savoured the sadism he publicly denounced. I make Turner the

captain of the slave ship (the stillborn child is also named Turner). Turner's well-chronicled love of children is seen in another light, as is his extreme prudence with money".

The fictional Turner thus carries the taint of complicity with an evil trade and becomes our representative; Turner the artist is implicated by association. Dabydeen forces together two potent images in violent juxtaposition so that we cannot ignore them: the image of Britain's commercial prosperity during the eighteenth century based on the slave trade; and the image of violated childhood Innocence. The portrait of Turner the sea captain has both in its sights:

"... he sketches endless numbers
In his book, face wrinkled in concentration
Like an old seal's mouth brooding in crevices
Of ice for fish; like my father
Counting beads at the end of each day,
Reckoning which calf was left abandoned
In the savannah, lost from the herd, eaten
By wild beasts. He checks that we are parcelled
In equal lots, men divided from women,
Chained in fours and children subtracted
From mothers. When all things tally
He snaps the book shut, his creased mouth
Unfolding in a smile, as when, entering
His cabin, mind heavy with care, breeding
And multiplying percentages, he beholds
A boy dishevelled on his bed.[51]

The readings and writings thus ranged around Turner's Slavers offer a complex of meanings where none of the texts - painting, poems, or prose - is innocent. In reading, as Barthes suggests, we rewrite the text of the work within our own lives. No doubt something of this was in Turner's impetus to paint and Dabydeen's to write; the opportunity for students to read each art through the other offers the most powerful resource in teaching the sister arts.

In Practice : Students' Readings

Apart from gallery visits to see originals, most classroom work with paintings will entail the study of reproductions, usually in one or more formats: slides, posters, books or postcards. Ironically, the humble post card, notwithstanding the often poor quality of the coloured image, may well prove to be the most user-friendly. Post cards are more manageable, offer variety in numbers, and generate an individual sense of ownership of the image in the way that slides, for instance, do not. For students used to a world saturated by reproduced images, yet unfamiliar with original paintings, some initial issues require exploration. The loss of materiality can be diagnosed by noting the coloured dots of which the reproduction is made. The distortion of size can be identified by comparing the reductive slide or postcard with the actual dimensions of the original. The cultural context can be exposed by discussing the media through which the reproductions are experienced in comparison with the gallery where originals now hang and the private or public places for which they may have been originally intended.

When poetry is introduced into the equation other methodological issues arise. Pairings of paintings and poems such as are found in the four books mentioned at the beginning of Part Two, can be introduced in a variety of ways. Handling these visual and verbal materials needs care since clearly the relationship between student, painting and poem is not a neat triangular one. The painting has not been constrained by the poem, but the poem has by the painting; and much depends upon the method and order via which the student approaches the two works of art. Generally, in order to accommodate this asymmetrical relationship between the reader, painting and poem, it is best to start with the painting so that the viewer's responses are not closed down by those of the poet.

An example of the ways-in to reading paintings and poems is provided by John Everett Millais's The Boyhood of Raleigh (1870) and Roger McGough's accompanying poem.[52]

J.E. MILLAIS
The Boyhood of Raleigh

A class of Year Ten GCSE students were shown a colour slide of the painting and given a photocopy of it centred on the page. They were asked to study the painting and, individually, to jot down on their photocopy what they noticed about the people, the details of the clothing, facial expressions and postures as well as any details of other objects in the scene. After a few minutes they were given a second short task to invent three speech/thinks bubbles to capture what each character might be saying or thinking. The activities were enjoyable and the results instructive, and often amusing, in opening up the picture. Here are two samples.

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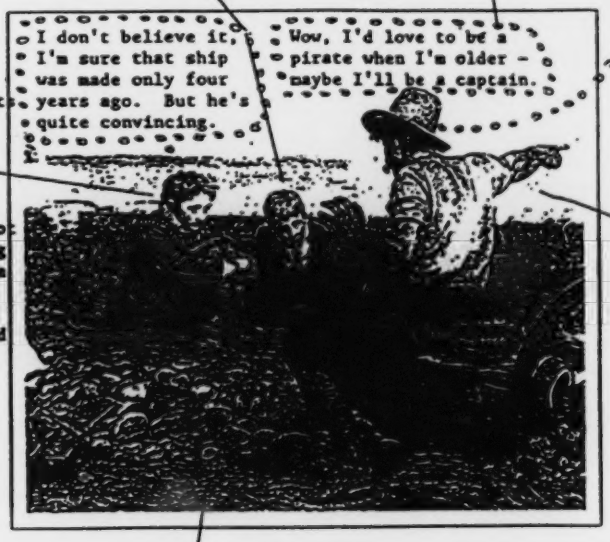
I would think he would be Raleigh because he looks interested and like he is dreaming of being a voyager but still engrossed in the story at the same time

Another thing for the painter's benefit - seagulls very very rarely are on their own.

It was that very ship that five years ago, our pirate ship 'The Jolly Parrot' invaded and robbed many riches.

I doubt if the two boys' parents know who they are talking to, as they look very wealthy and their parents would not want them mixing with people like this. I expect they have lived a very sheltered childhood.


I don't believe it, I'm sure that ship was made only four years ago. But he's quite convincing.
Wow, I'd love to be a pirate when I'm older - maybe I'll be a captain.

The man looks like a pirate judging by the very muscular fit body of him and the clothes.

J.E. MILLAIS
The Boyhood of Raleigh

The stones look like they've just been planted there for the painter's benefit - not a very convincing pile.

(2) RUSSELL

This is the boys friend and is not really interested in any of it.

The nearest kid respects his wisdom but has ideas of his own.

He is a stubborn fisherman who has travelled, ~~in the~~ small distances but thinks he knows of the whole world

J.E. MILLAIS
The Boyhood of Raleigh

The man was probably processing fish when the boys came up to him

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The reasons why Millais' painting was so popular in the nineteenth century and remains one of the best-known images from the period are fairly obvious. It has an embedded story, two boys listening to a sailor's yarn; it is painted brightly and energetically with a sense of optimism; but, above all, it celebrates the triumph of the British Empire, the Victorians' greatest pride. Different students sensed all these things in various ways but the most frequent comments were, as these examples indicate, about the personalities, dress and social standing of the figures, including a surprising absence of unanimity about which boy was Raleigh; and, as the first example shows in notes (1) and (2), about how this constructed image has been composed by the painter.

After sharing their notes the class was then given Roger McGough's poem:

The Boyhood of Raleigh

Entranced, he listens to salty tales
Of derring-do and giant whales.

Uncharted seas and Spanish gold,
Tempests raging, pirates bold.

And his friend? 'God I'm bored.
As for Jolly Jack, I don't believe a word.

What a way to spend the afternoons,
The stink of fish, and those ghastly pantaloons!'

In groups, the students talked about the way McGough's poem 'reads' the painting and compared his views with their own. Finally, they used their own speech/thinks bubbles as a starting-point for a short couplet poem in McGough's style to capture their own interpretation of the picture. The style is fairly easy to imitate and most students managed two or three rhyming couplets. Russell, whose notes we have just seen, was clearly so impressed with his speech bubble for the sailor that his first effort became the unforgettable:

The world is flat, my son, my son,
The world is flat, my son.

The world is flat, my son, my son,
The world is flat, my son ...

and so on, ad infinitum! His second effort may not lodge in the mind so persistently but it shows neat control over both the idea and the form and a wry sense of humour:

The rounded world is but a fable,
You ask any seaman able.

Travel too far and off the end
Both you and your ship will descend;

But Raleigh, he thinks, 'Why should I
Believe this cheating fisher guy?'

Pastiche has a role in students' learning about writing. Russell's version emerges from a process of viewing, reading, talking and note-making about two interrelated art forms over a period of forty minutes. Arguably, he has read the disjuncture between the boys' clothes and their facial expressions more plausibly than McGough: Raleigh on the left can easily be seen as sceptical and bored rather than "entranced"; certainly his friend seems to be showing a more active interest in the sailor's yarn. Russell's pastiche problematises the conventional interpretation of the mood and even of the identity of the boys and, in so doing, questions the basis of McGough's facile humour.

Implications for Teaching

Teaching the sister arts offers an insight into the unique qualities of paintings and poems through comparative study. The origin of the poem's inspiration is not only on view, literally, but also the subject of discussion and interpretation. Given the classroom methodology outlined above, the students are starting more or less where the poet started, in that they are faced with a painting which invites comment. Reading pictures is a more sociable activity than reading print. Pictures are usually viewed and discussed by groups of students more readily than poems because the visual medium is the more invitational. Representational paintings are generally more "open texts" than poems. Students find that the hesitant explorations of their own language are not daunted by the dominant language of the object of their attention. It is easier to talk and write about a work of art in an iconic medium different from the very one you are using to articulate your responses. Pedagogically, when studied as isolated texts, poems start with a problem: precisely because they are cast in the most precise and concrete forms of language that we possess, students find them relatively difficult to penetrate with the resources of their own language. By contrast, coming to a poem after talking about the painting that inspired it helps to demystify the poem and render it available as a parallel response to a shared experience as well as an autonomous entity in its own right.

Deconstruction also appears to be easier with paintings than with poems. Julie's notes on Millais' painting above about the stones and the seagulls being placed there "just for the painter's benefit" indicate her awareness of the image as a constructed object in which all the details, from the model ship to the clothes of the three characters, are selected to carry particular meanings. The inclusion of significant details to suggest atmosphere or emotion or to symbolise ideas is again more accessible to students in painting than in poetry. When metaphors can, literally, be seen in a painting they are easier to understand than when embedded within the language of a poetic text. Equally, the experience of learning how a painting is made gives students greater access to the construction of its sister art, particularly when the poem deals with the same subject. In short, the interdependence of the two art forms throws their distinctive features into relief. Students can learn what is unique about each art form from studying this relatedness.

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